FLAT OUT AND BLUESOME

'Nanoq: flat out and bluesome' is the story of polar bears, the largest land predators on earth, and their journey from the arctic wilderness to the museums and stately homes of the UK. The work documents the histories of each of these bears, the legacies of the hunters who shot them and the skills and expertise of the taxidermists who stuffed them.
Text by ***Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir, Mark Wilson*** *and* ***Lucy Byatt***

Lucy Byatt: A card arrived at Christmas – it must have been 2002. Accompanied by many others it stood out. The image was a photograph of the caravan that Bryndís Snæbjörnsdóttir and Mark Wilson were living in temporarily whilst they were renovating a house that they had bought in deepest Cumbria. The photograph had been taken after dark and the outline shape of the caravan could only just be seen, illuminated softly by an interior light, and more strikingly by glowing decorations strung haphazardly over the top of the window of this modest dwelling. When I visited, months later in spring, it was clear that this caravan was also the very organised site of the bulk of the process of investigation that lies behind *nanoq: flat out and bluesome.*

The artists have spent a number of years collecting information for this work; a constant alongside other research, teaching, travel and exhibitions. This was by no means the only place that had acted as a headquarters, yet it is useful to describe this image and to take the opportunity to reflect upon the site of the research and the nature of the artists' process of gathering information and, to some extent, the building of a network of other specialists around the endeavour.

Bryndis Snæbjörnsdóttir and **Mark Wilson**: This project begins with a survey of taxidermic polar bears in the United Kingdom. In its methodology we actively set out to track down these specimens. We have done everything within our power to locate every last one that exists as a whole (or near whole) mount, but also acknowledge that this may be an impossible task.

There are no doubt more 'out there'. After three years of research appear in their respective museums we traced 34 stuffed polar bears. From the outset it was our intention to make a series of large-scale, medium-format photographs of the bears *in situ*, as they and private homes, on display, in storage, or undergoing restoration.

It was important during this process, through discussion and the gathering of documentation, to glean as much as we could concerning the provenance of each bear and how it came to be in the UK. A further ambition was to bring together physically a significant number of specimens away from the museum context, into a 'converted' environment – ideally a contemporary art space with another history.

To collect is a way of connecting. Museums are stocked with objects that collectively seem to claim ownership or authority over environments, communities or even entire colonies. On a more personal level we collect items to accumulate knowledge and the extent of our collection is evidence to ourselves of our specific connection to the world.

Over the years, both individually and collectively as a collaborative team, we've been engaged consciously or otherwise in many types of collection from stamps to recordings to mountains to polar bears. Connected to this impulse, this sense of shaping identities is the tracing of one's family tree, the gathering of names under the umbrella of genealogy. The name Snæbjörnsdóttir translates: *(snæ)* snow, *(björns)* bear's, *(dóttir)* daughter – snow bear's daughter. What better way to connect to another history? What better way to find one's bearings in relation to an unfamiliar environment to which one is nevertheless instinctively drawn, than to connect by means of a name to one of the most powerful icons on earth?

Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson
During Installation ©

Finally it was always hoped that the project would generate a discourse in which audiences were able to consider their relationship not only to the 'polar bears' themselves, but to the history of their collection, presentation and preservation.

Much has been written on the hollowness of souvenirs, their intrinsic sadness and the ultimate futility of collecting things in an effort to remember places and events. Perhaps none is more poignant than that which is plucked from 'nature', that thing that once was living and now is dead or redundant – a shadow of what it once was in life: "Nothing looks as dead as a seashell in suburbia…." 1/

If we handle or knock expectantly on the surface of something stolen long ago, we might expect to hear the dull thud of its disembodiment, its unmediated physicality, in short, what it is – not what it was or what we think or thought it was.

Or, if we listen more closely we may hear the ring and echo of a much larger set of truths, only one of which will be indicative of its current condition and only one of which will be, or correspond in part with what we thought its significance to be. We may find a multitude of narratives and interlocking fragments, redolent not only of what has transpired, its dislocation, journey and its second life, but inevitably, if only by implication, of what else might have been.

LB: In her book *Objects of Desire*, Susan Stewart speaks of the difference between the souvenir and the collection – the souvenir being the single object that serves as a trace from an authentic experience.

We do not need or desire souvenirs of events that are repeatable. Rather we need and desire souvenirs of events that are reportable, events whose materiality has escaped us, events that thereby only exist through the invention of narrative. 2/

An implicit role of the museum is to provide narrative. Their collections are laid out before us, each object a souvenir of a journey of discovery brought back to describe and stand in for a whole other culture. For ape, read jungle, for lion, desert; these artefacts are then set

Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson
Newcastle, cleaning ©

against carefully painted dioramas that offer further narrative to the nature within which each creature once existed. *The pressed flowers under the glass speak to the significance of their owner in nature and not to themselves in nature. They are a sample of a larger and more sublime nature, a nature differentiated by human experience, by human history.* 3/

Stewart goes on to suggest that the souvenir has a trace of value whilst the collection simply represents an aestheticisation of use. "The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context." 4/

The artists have defined their field of exploration. Within this there is a clear decision in creating a limit, to restrict a study in this globally conscious age to a single country and to be considering issues of colonial pillage and collecting through a single animal – the polar bear. And yet it is in the setting of this frame that an entirely complex and focused picture has emerged. The tracing of each bear; the story of the expedition on which it was caught and shipped to the British Isles; the discovery of the zoo, museum or private collection to which it was added. The artists place themselves within their process of gathering and ultimately their collection of information in a way that reflects an ambivalence. The series of photographic images taken in each museum or private collection is framed in such a way that makes the artists' fascination with the world of the museum clearly apparent. They seem seduced by the discipline of collecting and in the creation of narrative through an aesthetic experience. In potential conflict with this, the work also reveals and problematises the shedding or misplacement of responsibility on the part of the hunter. The sheer number of bears found and photographed, the concern with context, and the act of moving 'specimens' out from the protection of the accustomed surroundings of their museum, positions the work and the investigation of the artists amid the complexity of their findings. They do not resort to the easy solutions of summing up or taking on a position of moral high ground.

BS/MW: We are aware that in undertaking the tracking down of bears, we were involved in a process that in

some way mirrored the original acts of hunting. It was a cultural hunt – unheroic perhaps and clearly not dangerous, but nevertheless one where the unexpected could be anticipated. The eighteenth and nineteenth century impulses demanded that newly-built museums be stocked like Arks with taxidermic representatives of every conceivable species. These demands were fed and met by equally enthusiastic pioneers and explorers who ventured into newly-discovered territories and landscapes, inaccessible to all but themselves. The expeditions were advanced and underpinned, not least financially, by the weight of 'science' and 'education', yet the hunger for the trophy and a reputation for heroism was very often the motivation for individual hunters.

LB: After the hunt it is the taxidermist that plays a central role within a discipline that acts to remove the reality of the dead carcass and to suggest 'life' by means of a variety of palatable styles and poses. It is left entirely to the professional integrity, expertise and above all intention of the taxidermist as to how the representation is managed and to the keeper of collections as to how the individual specimen enhances the collection. It seems that the 'quality' of the representation could only be as good as the taxidermist's knowledge, skills and the tools available. The taxidermist will therefore read and date a specimen by the methods used in preservation. So each specimen begins to take on a new identity. These are no longer polar bears – they are renewed objects representing polar bear-ness. They are identified by the date of mounting, a method perhaps identifying a particular taxidermist, part of a specific collection, set in a recognised pose. These objects are recontextualised within a collection, an internalised world intended as a representation of some other, distant place. This is perhaps where the museum differs from the Ark – the Ark is a holding station, waiting for the waters to drain away. The museum provided a function more akin to that of aspic.

The artists' process of unearthing information inevitably relates to and overlaps the specialist research of others. This is apparent both in the museum, as they encounter each collection, and within teaching institutions as they seek out opinion. Through their own investigations, the artists reveal the interests and research of others as it relates to and informs their own. Over the time that Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson have been developing this work the individuals who have responded and engaged with the artists through their common concerns have become central to the direction of the endeavour. The considerable common interests and study have contributed to sustaining the artists' own sense of belief in the process. They have gathered a network of individuals who, in some cases, would otherwise not have been connected.

BS/MW: Museums have, almost without exception, been of great assistance to us during the research stages of this project. They have demonstrated a great deal of interest in helping us find polar bears because although there is, or rather was no database on the subject, each keeper or curator knew of two or perhaps three in other collections. The communities we have encountered (the keepers of collections, taxidermists, private owners, technicians, historians, museum directors) have all been engaged with and added to our specific research. This has been an enabling factor throughout – defusing protocol and prompting all manner of discoveries.

The crucial and vital symbiosis between what is produced and the unique means by which its production has been made possible, brings a new dimension to what we deem to be a broader collaborative practice.

LB: The particularity of this series of commissions with Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson is in the careful decision-making relating to where the work is encountered. In the case of the photographic images we see the vastness of the collecting endeavour, not just that of the culture that stocked the museums but also of the artists who travelled, searched out and are now presenting a collection of their own.

The artists' commitment to showing these images in the context of the museum requires the viewer to read simultaneously the image and the context in which it is being seen. No solutions are presented, only suggested associations that cannot help but resonate.

BS/MW: The polar bear in Kendal stands in a classic, aggressive pose set in front of a painted arctic landscape. The romantic scene features a rosy midnight glow. The specimen is standing on a plinth on top of which is another pedestal, made to look like a small ice floe. This elevation reinforces the aggressive and overpowering effect as the bear is not standing properly on his back legs but instead gives the impression of being just about to strike or jump. The visitor has to negotiate a narrow space between the bear and the opposite display. This awkwardness is further reinforced by the fact that the bear is not cased. The display is part of an arctic corner in which we see a painted autumn tundra behind a cased musk ox and snowy owls amongst other specimens. It is a somehow awkward, fragmented display in that it doesn't sit convincingly as a diorama and relies heavily on token arctic references. Above it all sits the trophy head and a security camera possibly directed at our encounter with the bear.

The bear itself is a trophy, as is suggested on the label behind it, claiming that it was shot by the local Lord Lonsdale in the year 1888/1889 during an arctic expedition. Further investigations revealed that the expedition took him across northern Canada, Alaska and

Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson
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expedition took him across northern Canada, Alaska and eventually to Kodiak Island.

The Somerleyton polar bears (one of which we borrowed for the show at Spike Island) normally stand in a symmetrical arrangement in the vestibule on either side of the grand entrance to Somerleyton Hall. We understand that they have stood in this way, guarding the stately home, since they were brought back from Spitzbergen in 1897 by the first Lord Somerleyton. Out of shot in our photograph, in the centre of the entrance hall is a marble bust of the first Lord Somerleyton as a young boy (see above).

As a young man in 1897 it was he who travelled to Spitzbergen as a paying, working crew member and he who took part in the shooting and capture of a recorded total of 55 polar bears – two of which now stand behind his likeness. It would seem to be a classic tableau – evoking an archetype of British aristocratic adventuring with the relics and trophies of colonial enterprise.

LB: The artists' decision to shift a considerable number of bears from their accustomed museum and private collections to the white space of the contemporary art gallery is clearly another site-specific act. Despite the fact that Spike Island (an ex-tea packing factory) is not a purpose-built space, the language of the modernist white cube is vividly evident within the vast white hall. Bringing ten bears together and separating them from the narration of the museum allows us to look again, to compare and contrast. Housed in their blank and identical glass cases this off-white collection of stuffed animal replicas, stripped of reference, can be read as an aesthetic spectacle. Again in Susan Stewart 's text, she refers to Noah's Ark as the "archetypal collection": "The world of the ark is not of nostalgia but of anticipation…. Once the object is completely severed from its origin [the museum], it is possible to generate a new series, to start again within a context that is framed by the selectivity of the collector." 5/

BS/MW: The polar bear is a totemic, iconic creature. We have witnessed how in living human memory, the image of the polar bear has been expropriated and put to the most varied and unlikely purposes – selling dreams, sweets, lifestyles, travel. In all cases except seemingly for the most contemporary and chilling – its role as iconic

Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson
Somerleyton ©

representative of the demise of its own environment – its appeal is dependent on an almost inescapable anthropomorphism.

The bear stands on two legs. It plays and wrestles, it sits, it rests, all in ways which are suggestively 'human'. We also know the polar bear to be a formidable predator at the top of the food chain in the arctic, commanding the greatest respect of all visitors to that environment. It is a catalogue of paradoxes. It is a prism with the capacity to contain and refract all manner of response in us: fear, horror, respect, pathos, affection, humour. It is this capacity above all others which makes it such a potent symbol and for us, in relation to this project, such a powerful reality to seek to reappraise.

Amongst the bears we borrowed for Spike Island, were two relatively recent mounts prepared in the late 1960s. One was from Sheffield Museum, the pride of its collection, and the other from Edinburgh Museum, both mounted in rather 'natural' looking, playful, friendly, and paradoxically anthropomorphic poses. These female bears (probably siblings), although mounted by two different taxidermists, spent their lives together at Edinburgh Zoo. They had the names *Queenie*, (later *Janie* and now *Snowy*) and *Jim,* although *Jim* on his/her death in 1975 was registered as female. Both bears died within months of each other and both had been brought over from Canada to Scotland as cubs by a Captain Koran on 25 September 1947.

LB: The suggestion within Stewart's essay that dislocating the
collection from its origin allows new possibilities of interpretation is particularly interesting in this context. The polar bears amassed for this occasion were simply unpacked from their crates, cased and positioned in the vast gallery. Away from the signs and symbols of the museum this new collection did indeed act to create an array of new possibilities. The artists designed a stepped dais to be built at the far end of the gallery. Scattered with blankets and cushions this provided an active space – a place where much discussion and many events were initiated throughout the duration of the exhibition.

The spectacle of this collection fascinated, charmed and repulsed. However, regardless of personal opinion there was a distinct inclination on the part of the audience to participate in the discussion. A group of

artists associated with Spike Island ran a series of daily events throughout the exhibition. Each event took the installation as its starting point. The programme included screenings and talks, performance and lectures. Experts were invited to speak, perform and respond. Visitors made repeat visits and the gallery took on an unfamiliar dynamism. Whilst the act of placing the bears in the space was the work of the artists, the familiarity of the objects themselves offered an ownership that gave visitors a greater sense of authority as they repeatedly circulated the space.

There are distinct consequences in the act of display and engagement with an audience both within the context of the contemporary art gallery and of the museum. Just as Snæbjörnsdóttir and Wilson have left space within their practice for their community of specialists, they are also strategic in leaving space for the interpretation and vocalisation of the viewer.

A day conference entitled *White Out*, initiated by the artists and from which the essays (by Steve Baker, Garry Marvin, Michelle Henning) within the book *nanoq: flat out and bluesome* were developed, brought another audience, a specialist audience from across the country to sit amongst the collection of specimens and take part in the discussion.

From the initial idea a wide and extremely specific network of contacts has evolved which seems continually to radiate, to point back through history and forward to a debate that makes analysis of the cultural and economic tensions in our attitudes to nature. Within their specific area of enquiry, the artists allow the information that they have accumulated to portray their own narrative. The polar bear may be the starting point for this narrative yet there is a far greater resonance – whilst we are presented with different yet similar images and interpretations of one species the viewer cannot read the work without considering more universal implications.

BS/MW: The context for art – the place where these shifts and realignments appear in the world – is a vital factor in its functionality. It occurred to us that as a direct means of introduction to our recent projects, even beyond the issue of where the work is seen, it's helpful to regard the art itself as a new and enabling context, for fragmentary and physically unconnected threads, ideas, information and objects which otherwise remain scattered – historically, culturally and geographically. In fact these elements are sometimes only notionally related until the process and the act of art conjoins them as a tangible and revelatory whole.

Snæbjörnsdóttir/Wilson
Worchester ©

1/ Hamilton-Paterson, James, *The Great Deep, The Sea and its Thresholds*, New York: Random House, 1992, p. 118.
2/ Stewart, Susan "On Longing – Narratives of the Miniature the Gigantic the Souvenir and the Collection", *Objects of Desire*, Durham: Duke University Press, 1993, p. 135.
3/ Stewart, Susan "On Longing", p. 151.
4/ Stewart, Susan "On Longing", p. 151.
5/ Stewart, Susan "On Longing", p. 152.

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